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ABSTRACT

The scientific method has little credence in inner-city communities. Often the methodology has been contaminated with prejudicial biases, self-enrichment, appeasement, compromise, distortion, and failure to communicate the intent, findings, and interpretation of studies. The community's confidence in research can, with some difficulty, be restored. Some suggestions include clear, continuous communication with community residents. All questions should be consistently and frequently discussed in an informal atmosphere, such as a coffee hour. The findings should be gathered and utilized with sensitivity and empathy. (Author/DM)

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LEGITIMIZING THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD FOR THE INNER CITY COMMUNITY

by James W. Elsbery

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Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me begin by saying that the scientific method has little credence in any of our nation's inner-city communities. The residents of these areas may never even have heard of the term, "Scientific Method," but they are all too familiar with what they perceive to be its results. We, a segment of the scientific community, are partly responsible for this reaction. Many of us have contaminated the methodology with prejudicial biases, self-enrichment at the cost of the method, appeasement, compromise, distortion, and failure to communicate the intent, findings, and interpretation of studies.

The test is whether or not we -- as educators, sociologists, and social psychologists, but essentially as researchers -- can restore the community's confidence in research. I submit that we can, but the road to success is arduous and painstaking. Let me indicate a few of our mistakes in an attempt to extricate ourselves from the distrust and resentment which exists towards us on the part of many inner-city communities, and towards so much of the work we're presently performing.

If we look briefly at some of our statements and some of the interpretations that we have placed upon data, we begin to understand the development of the community's lack of confidence.

Dashed Expectations

When the inner-city community was told that the problem with the education of its children rests with the home and not the educational system and that the Federal government will solve the problem, then we may have heightened expectations. When we talked in terms of desegregating schools because that will help alleviate the educational problem, we again have

heightened expectations. If we talk and write in terms of Head Start programs being the solution, we again have heightened community expectations. The community believed that such investments of time and energy would result in a significant change in the academic performance of its children. The community also believed that there would be a significant change in ethnic make-up of the schools. They believed that there would be a significant change in what took place within the schools. In time, however, it became clear to most parents that the schools were not more integrated but in many instances--certainly in the north--more segregated. It also became clear that there was no major upgrading in the academic achievement on the parts of the inner-city child, be he Black or Puerto Rican, compared to the academic achievement of white children throughout the rest of the country. The inevitable result was a dashing of expectations. Educators, researchers, and evaluators led the community to believe that these methods and approaches were potential answers to the problem. We spoke and wrote with such assurance and supported our statements with a plethora of statistics and professional mumbo-jumbo. At first the community believed us; for the educator, the researcher, the evaluator consistently spoke as though they really knew the answers, really knew how children learned, really knew what made for good learning and good teaching. They had been good propagandists, but now the propaganda is backfiring. It is difficult, if not impossible, to talk knowledgably and effectively about how to teach children if we do not know how learning really takes place.

By and large, this fact has not been candidly communicated to the community. Therefore, those in the inner-city rightfully feel that they

have been duped and that perhaps they should no longer trust us. They rightfully feel that they, themselves, now ought to be involved in the educational process, ought to be involved with the research. Their position is a very simple one: "Its not working now. You have not made it work. Can we do any worse? Might we not do better?" And besides, whose lives are at stake?"

Whose Problem Is It

Let us take another look at causes for community distrust. In many instances, the federal, state, city government, indicate or give the impression that, the problem is with the inner-city child or his ethnic group. The government, or agency gives the impression that it or they will help that particular group with its problem. Now if we really do help those individuals resolve that problem, they will not care whether it was of their making as we maintained , or someone else's. What they are concerned about is the end result; if it is positive, they will accept the blame. If, on the other hand, the problem is not resolved, then that particular group often will resent the fact that we have claimed that the problem was theirs when perhaps it wasn't, and again begins to doubt our ability to cope, and in fact begins to doubt whether or not our intentions are sincere.

Political Awareness

Some of the research we have carried out has also helped bring us to this state of low repute with many inner-city communities. In some instances it wasn't the research itself, but how it was employed or taken out of context by others. We must know however, how to handle our material when it deals with politically explosive topics or exploitable issues.

Unfortunately, the works of such well meaning and dedicated sociologists, psychologists, and educators as Coleman, Moynihan, Riessman, Passow, Jencks and others are consistently read as sterotyping the black America as pathological: different in kind from his white fellow student at best and uneducable at worse. The Coleman study, Educational Equality in the United States, should have been employed to show how segregation and the general degradation of the educational system -- not racial inequality -- are the major characteristics of the American educational experience; but such was not the case. Instead, the study was and is used to support the belief that the black child's problem with learning is, to a significant degree, overcome by placing him in a white environment.

The assumption here would appear to be that segregated Negro education is inferior because children in it are inferior. According to the Coleman study, the physical facilities have little bearing upon learning and the substantative material taught is also of limited significance. The Coleman study is not directed towards -- nor utilized to show that -- the educational system is the failure, but rather to imply in the strongest terms that the child is the problem and if we bring about certain changes within either him or his environment, then the system will be able to do as well for him as it is doing for his white counterpart. It would be fair to conclude that the system, rather than the child, is at fault because there is evidence to indicate that the same school conditions which produce low black achievement also produce high black achievement. Under such conditions, the difference cannot be attributed to inherited racial characteristics. Moreover [though it has not

been made clear to the general public and educators about the Coleman study], two correlates of achievement emerge: individual social class and school social class. In both instances we are dealing with socio-economic phenomena rather than race. Race becomes an issue because of racism. Racism has placed the blackman more often and in larger numbers at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder than the white man. Since social class is the most important school correlate of achievement scores, Negroes are perceived as "stupid," inferior by race rather than because of racism. The way the Coleman study has most often been interpreted, with selective "facts" presented and seldom set right, would indicate that the black child alone constitutes the problem.

What the authors of such studies as the Coleman report seem to have overlooked is that research in some areas is highly political or at least power-laden. This means that one must be sure that the material will be used and discussed in ways that accord with all of the data and the purpose of the study. The social values related to the blackman mean that data will often be interpreted by both the author and others in a way that most supports those values. Even when the author is perceived as being "liberal," his movement along the racist continuum may not be far enough towards equality of potential intellect and performance to free him totally of some bias. This often results in making excuses for the blackman or attempting to explain away his behavior because of deprivations in his life. It is regarded as a very liberal attitude to attribute those deprivation to racism. But these same liberals rarely indicate that system change is the solution.

But this is still far from where one should be in a system that defines its philosophy in terms of equal opportunity. These approaches too often assume that something must be done to the people in question before they can fit in and move along with the rest. The system and those who breed it are rarely questioned systematically. Seldom does the research conclude that it is not the blackman, but rather the system which must be changed. Any comparative study of value would clearly show that whites too are suffering under the existing system. Unfortunately, we are not often able to look objectively at what happens to blacks in the system in relation to their ability, and then ask what difference do we find between blacks and whites under the existing system in relationship to their abilities.

Certainly, any one group may do better within a system that is more related to its abilities than a group whose abilities are less related to that system. The fact that this is true only reveals the degree to which the system and a dominant power group have been tailored to one another. Comparing the achievement of the two groups [dominant power group and a minority group] functioning within such a system and attempting to draw conclusions related to the comparative inherent abilities of the two groups is not only illogical and irrational but stupid. Less stupid perhaps than blind, for when someone with the best of intentions makes such comparisons, it may be because some aspect of the socialization process has blinded him to the obvious. Perhaps here is where racism as a social value has had its most insidious effect. We become apologists where no apology is needed, instead of saying: "Considering the conditions under which we have placed group X, it is remarkable that it is doing so well. I wonder what is the quality or qualities that have made it possible for so many in this group

to have done so well and for so many of the others to have even survived."

The Moynihan report, "The Negro Family" is a study which gives the strongest possible impression that the black family is pathological. It is stated that this is because of racism and discrimination, but it makes one believe that what is found of the black family is indigenous to them and to no others. There is little evidence presented to show that thousands of black families are complete units with fathers and without illegitmate children. Little data are given to indicate that thousands upon thousands of black children do make it through schools, having only the same difficulties with the education system that white children have. There is no comparison of the data related to black families who are low socioeconomic and white families in the same socioeconomic bracket. The black family is perceived as an entity unto itself, and this is not so. There is no discussion of what the data would reveal if socioeconomics and the effect of racism were held constant in comparing whites and black families. If it is argued that it is not possible to hold racism constant, then how valid can the intrepretations of the data be?

Rather than studying the blackman as an organism in the test tube labeled "pathological" or "reject", we should be studying why and how the socialization process failed "to-do-in" all blacks. Maybe, there is something inherent in the Negro that makes it possible for so many of his kind to have succeeded in spite of the system. Surely, it would be more illuminating to focus on these, rather than continually those whom the system destroyed, if only psychologically. Perhaps, there is a common commodity in both black and white children that has made many of them succeed equally within the existing educational structure. The major defect of the

Moyniham report is the onesided prsentation of the results of discrimination and racism.

These are but a few examples of our inability to realize the potential ways in which our materials may be used. What is worse is an attitude on our part not to care whether the material, as presented, invites a damaging distortion.

Understanding Is Essential For Communication

Also damaging is the fact that we have never attempted to educate the community to the work we are doing and why we are doing it. We have consistently talked in terms of "scientific method," "multiple regression," "Chi-square," terms which have no meaning to the average inner-city parent. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the community has been striking out at the educational system, and in doing so has struck at those it perceives to be the supporters of that system. To that degree, we have been receiving a great deal of the animosity from inner-city communities. Perhaps much of it is rightfully deserved.

An Issue Of Sensitivity

A final point must be made. The fact that most of the inner-city communities are black or Puerto Rican, and most researchers have been white, has only served to exacerbate the problem in terms of credibility, trust and involvement.

I've attempted to indicate, very briefly, some of the events that have gotten us to where we are. But it must be remembered that the clamor for education on the part of the black and Puerto Rican child and on the part of his parents in the inner-city is not new. It has existed for

generations. We are just hearing more about it. The black, the Puerto Rican parent clamors because he has been convinced that through the educational system, his children can make it into a social and economic world where the level of want will be far less than his own and where health will be at a maximum.

Now, if we are going to do anything about this credibility gap, it must be something significant. It requires a major behavioral change on the part of the educational system and, in particular, on the part of those of us who are researchers and evaluators.

Questions Asked By The Inner-City Parent

The questions consistently asked of the researchers are essentially the same: Who controls this particular study? What is the study for? Who will benefit from the study? Where will I be able to give input? Will I have an opportunity to alter or disagree with this particular study? Is this study being used as another ploy? Who is running the study? Are these individuals my people? In conducting this study, will people of our community be involved? Will our community people be trained? Even if it is a good study, even if we agree that it is important, in the eyes of the community it invariably raises the question of what guarantees will the community have that it will make any difference. How will this study finally be used? Will people know about it?

Certain conditions, however, must exist before questions like these are asked in a spirit of cooperation, understanding and harmony. It is imperative that the researcher understand that he must work with more than just the established agency within whose four walls he may be performing this study or through which he has been financed. That which affects

children, affects the parent. Parents today wish to know, wish to see those who are conducting studies. They want to know what the study is about and they want to know and see these things before the studies get underway.

These questions indicate not merely interest and curiosity, but what could be characterized as a dedication to children in the area of education.

Such questions also indicate a sincere desire to be of value and of help, to see self in terms of achievement. Too often I fear that we, as researchers, perceive community involvement as interloping, interference, contamination, or as a power play or ploy: in short, as destructive. But this is not what these questions indicate. Our behavior, it seems to me, should make clear to the community that we wish to work in a cooperative venture for common gain and common good.

Potential Solutions

A solution to the problem requires that the community be informed of the potential study at the earliest possible time. The improved education of the child, the research design, questionnaires, schedules, rationale, etc., should all be completed at least in draft form. At this early stage, the community should be informed of the study and why it is needed. One should solicit community input as to how it perceives (1) the need for such a study, and (2) the best way of going about performing it. The experience of working with community organizations, groups, and individuals has shown that it is best to have your program completely outlined and written up. Generally, the community does not wish to be the final censor. It does wish to see itself as having a significant input with regard to any study which is,

ultimately, is to affect their lives or the lives of their children.

As soon as material is prepared in draft form, community leaders should be informed that such a study is contemplated. Quite often this means that the agency contracting for the research should inform community leaders of its intentions. A meeting should take place between community leaders, the contracting agency, and those parties who are to perform the research. General ideas, concepts, intents should be aired. Problem areas as perceived by each of the groups should be discussed. Agreement is often reached rather quickly when these three parties come together at the beginning of such a venture. In any case, once agreement has been reached, it is then suggested that a meeting take place in the community--if possible, off school grounds--attended by interested members of the community who will be affected by this study. Sufficient advance publicity should be given to such a meeting. It is also suggested that the meeting begin as informally as possible. For example, a coffee hour prior to a question and answer period is suggested. Other types of social activities might also be engaged in. The intent is to relax any potential tension, to get the groups together on a peer level where they can perceive themselves as working towards common aims.

When the formal part of the program begins, it is suggested once again that the formality be fairly relaxed. The basic reasons for the study should be given; the community leaders should play a significant part in indicating their interest in the study and should convey the fact that they have participated in prior discussions among the community leaders, the contracting agencies, and the researchers. It is important to remember that experience and performance records are

criteria which can not be substituted for by ethnicity; but at the same time it must be kept in mind that one can find skilled, experienced, and exceedingly professional craftsman in the area of research, development, and evaluation among people of all ethnic backgrounds.

At the "get acquainted with us and the study" sessions, the introduction of individuals, the comments related to the study should be as short and brief as possible. They should also be free of professional jargon. Let the community, the audience, feel that it has the right and the opportunity to ask as many questions as possible. The answers, once again, should be as brief or as expansive as the questioner or the audience indicates is required.

If a second meeting is required or requested, this should be done. It is suggested however, that an attempt should be made to schedule it as close to the first as possible. No further work with regard to the study should be done prior to that second meeting without indicating to the community and its leaders that this is intended and without getting their approval. Negative feedback from community leaders and the community will indicate the difficulty that you may have if you proceed without having received their acceptance. If these guidelines are met, more often than not one will find that the study will move easily and there will be great enthusiasm on the part of the community and community leaders to help--as interviewers, as interviewees, as coders, and in all other capacities that their existing experiences and skills permit.

Time schedules should be established and shared with community leaders. These schedules should relate to various phases of study performance, deadline dates, when the first series of questionnaires

will be completed, when they will go for analysis, when the first returns will be had. At the same time, schedules should be established for future meetings with the community or community leaders to inform them of the information that is being gained throught the study.

Permit the community to feel that it is consistently being kept informed of the progress and findings related to the study. If these suggestions are carried out and the aforementioned questions answered and the communication lines between the three parties kept open, all evidence indicates that the study will have full support and backing of the community. Researchers, however, should not become the public relations personnel for the agency; they should be sure how their material is going to be used and be certain that they have access to community leaders at all times. Copies of their materials should be submitted to community leaders for critique. It is also strongly urged that researchers make it clear that their studies cannot be buried regardless of what those studies may reveal. Any contact between the research agency and the contractor must permit the researcher to publish his findings in some form upon the completion of his work; publication should not be at the discretion of the contracting agent. It is also suggested that, wherever possible, community personnel be employed in carrying out the study. Where possible, community personnel can be trained as interviewers, as coders or, in some other capacity. If these techniques and skills are employed then, it is maintained, community support and involvement will readily be shown with regard to any research studies and evaluations which we professionals perform in any inner-city or other community throughout this natinn. Such behavior on our

part should result in superior end products while at the same time restoring the community's confidence in the need for research and the scientific method.